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# The use of social networking websites in the international market: The example of Facebook from the perspective of individual users

The aim of the article is to identify the areas of using Facebook – one of the most popular social networking websites. The analysis has been based on empirical data gathered among individual users in several foreign markets (China, Poland, Spain, Germany, Russia, the United States, Turkey). Empirical quantitative research has been carried out in which paper and electronic inquiry forms (CAWI) have been filled out by the respondents. Four areas of using Facebook by individual users have been distinguished: communication, education, consumer behaviour, and work. The obtained indicators of Spearman rank correlation between the frequency of using Facebook and the distinguished areas are very diversified, both among the studied groups and the areas of use. The results show the peculiarities of particular groups in terms of using Facebook.

Keywords: social networking websites, Facebook, international market

JEL classification: M31, M37, O35, J10

# Zastosowanie serwisów społecznościowych na rynku międzynarodowym. Przykład Facebooka z perspektywy indywidualnych użytkowników

Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja obszarów zastosowania jednego z najczęściej wykorzystywanych serwisów społecznościowych, jakim jest Facebook. Analizę wykonano na podstawie danych empirycznych zgromadzonych na kilku rynkach zagranicznych (w Chinach, Polsce, Hiszpanii, Niemczech, Rosji, Stanach Zjednoczonych i Turcji) wśród indywidualnych użytkowników. Badania ilościowe przeprowadzono wśród respondentów z wykorzystaniem papierowej i elektronicznej formy ankiety. Wyróżniono cztery obszary wykorzystania Facebooka przez użytkowników indywidualnych: komunikacja, edukacja, zachowania konsumenckie oraz praca. Otrzymane wskaźniki korelacji Spearmana pomiędzy częstotliwością używania Facebooka a wyróżnionymi obszarami są bardzo zróżnicowane zarówno pomiędzy badanymi grupami, jak i obszarami użytkowania. Rezultaty pokazują specyfikę poszczególnych grup w zakresie korzystania z Facebooka

Słowa kluczowe: serwisy społecznościowe, Facebook, rynek międzynarodowy

Klasyfikacja JEL: M31, M37, O35, J10

## Introduction

No more than over ten years ago the Internet was a place to look for information and exchange e-mails. The scale of its use and the role it played in the life of an average person changed in the middle of the previous decade of this century. It was the time when Facebook appeared – one of the first social networking websites that revolutionised the life of many people in the whole world [Wo, Chen, 2015]. The number of social networking websites started to grow along with their popularity among regular Internet users. Traditional methods are very often replaced with the modern ones which aim at helping to make everyone's life easier, to save us time, effort, and costs. The influence of the development of new technologies can be observed in nearly every area of human activity, starting with the ways in which we spend our free time, through the process of looking for information and decision-making, shopping, and professional involvement, and ending with education.

The aim of this article is to identify the areas of the use of Facebook, which is one of the most popular social networking websites, in the international market. An attempt has been made to answer the question whether the frequency of using a social networking website such as Facebook influences the way and range of its use by individual users. The analysis has been based on the empirical data gathered in several foreign markets in order to identify the differences and similarities between them.

The structure of this article is subordinated to its main aim. The first part includes an overview of the literature on the discussed subject matter. Then, the methodology and results of the conducted empirical research are presented; finally, the conclusions are offered which can be helpful for the website in terms of its functionality in particular markets as well as for the cooperating companies, e.g. advertisers.

## 1. Literature overview

### 1.1. Facebook among other social networking websites in the international market

The way and character of using social networking media depends mostly on the people's needs; using particular instruments meets these needs. For example, the need to share one's travel memories with their friends may be met by using a website or a communicator such as Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat, or by writing a blog [Nadkarni, Hofmann, 2012]. The media which connect people into net-

works of friends that share common interests, e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn, are among the first media created and are continuously popular among users. Many users also use the media that make it possible for them to express themselves in writing, verbally, or with video recordings – e.g. Twitter, YouTube, Youku, or blogs – as well as to use the information uploaded by others [Nakagawa, Arzubiaga, 2014; Kyung-Sun et al., 2014; Hamid et al., 2015].

One of the latest rankings on the world popularity of social networking websites (in terms of user activity) shows the predominance of Facebook (Figure 1). Next places are held by Chinese Qzone, Tumblr, Google+, Instagram, and Twitter. The subsequent places are mainly held by local social networking websites, such as the Chinese Baidu Tieba or Sina Weibo, or VKontakte, popular in Russia [Kemp, 2015; Kemp, 2016].

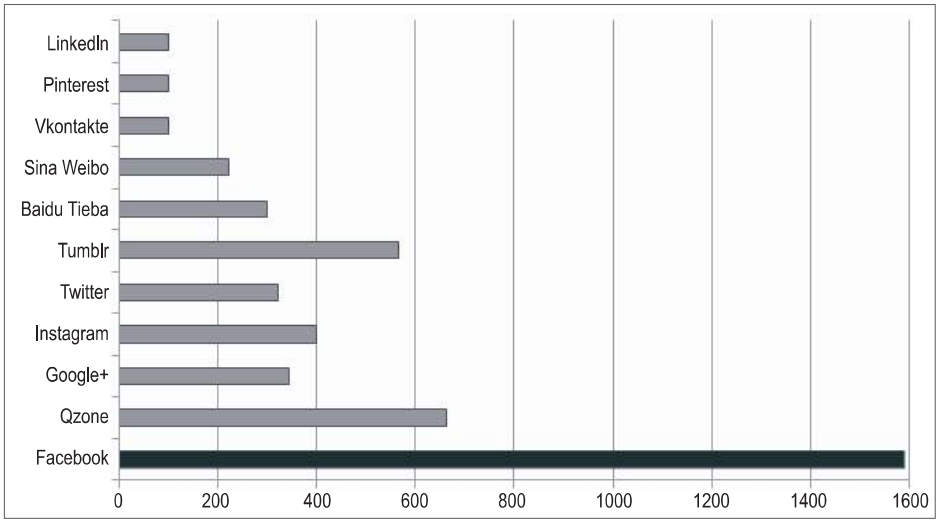



Figure 1. The number of active accounts – users of social networking websites in the world (mln) in January 2016

* in the case of Google+, data from 2015 were used

Source: [Kemp 2015; 2016].

## 1.2. Areas of using Facebook

The predominant position of Facebook in the international market of social media influences the variety of its use. The literature on the subject presents the studies conducted by different authors within the discussed field, which identified the following areas of using social networking websites: communication, consumer behaviour, education, and work. What role plays Facebook there? Some of the aforementioned numerous studies are presented below:

– communication (C): the primary assumption of the Facebook's founders was to enable the on-line communication between students [Aburai et al., 2013] and to make it possible for them to share their materials and search for different types of information [Krasnova et al., 2012]. The project by Ellison et al. [2007] showed that 94% of young American Facebook users communicated daily with around 150–200 people from their friend lists. What is interesting, most of them were their friends from the offline world. In the conclusion, the researchers stated that Facebook was not perceived by the studied group as a significant tool to meet new people, but as a means of communication with those already known in the real world. In one of the latest projects, Musango et al. [2016] emphasize the significance of Facebook as a means of communication for diversified purposes. Their research is focused on the interdependence between the time spent on Facebook and the quality of interpersonal communication – as it turns out, Facebook is a valuable tool to develop and differentiate means of interpersonal communication;
– education (ED): Facebook can serve as a source of information used when studying and as a means of communication with fellow students or teachers about study materials [Wu, Chen, 2015]. The research papers by Benson et al. [2015] indicate that Facebook is often used by students to ask questions about studies and to study interactively because of its broadly conceived accessibility. In his study, Hussain [2012] evaluated the use of Facebook for academic purposes among the students in Pakistan, proving it to be an important source of information and communication tool. Sarapin and Morris [2015] pointed out the use of Facebook by students to communicate with their teachers. The research by Ruleman [2012] conducted among the American youth also confirmed the use of Facebook for educational purposes, reporting that younger students use Facebook and text messages while studying more often than their older fellow students;
– consumer behaviour (CB): the way of using social media can also stem from consumer behaviour, e.g. searching for information about specific products that will help the users make a particular buying decision [Iyengar et al., 2009; Barker, Ota, 2011], sharing their knowledge about the products with other users [Ho, 2014], or following advertisements [Okazaki, Taylor, 2013; Barreto, 2013; Steyn et al., 2011]. The greatest number of articles in the literature on the subject point out the significance of Facebook in sharing information about products and expressing opinions about brands among friends (e-Word of Mouth) [Wallace et al., 2014]. For example, the research conducted by Ho [2014] among the Facebook users showed that positive opinions of the users' friends on a particular product directly influence their trust for the relevant brand. In other words, communication between the Facebook users impacts highly

on the way a brand is perceived as well as on building brand trust [Kucukemiroglu, Kara, 2015];

– work (W): using Facebook for professional purposes can be regarded in two ways: first, as a tool used by individual users; secondly, as an instrument for companies looking for new employees. This article focuses on the individual perspective. Developing networks of friends on social networking websites might be useful in terms of looking for a job [Williams, Verhoeven, 2008]. Particular media, e.g. LinkedIn, make it possible to present the profile of a user/employee, their educational background, work experience, and career path [Gerard, 2012]. The results of the international research conducted by the Randstadt Research Institute show that social media, including Facebook, play a significant role in the job market [Salesnews.pl, 2015].

The overview of the research results and other authors' analyses has made it possible to formulate the main thesis, namely that the general frequency of using Facebook influences the frequency of its use in particular areas. In order to verify the main thesis, four working hypotheses have been posed, which state that the greater frequency of using Facebook, the more frequent its use in the areas of communication (H1a), education (H1b), consumer behaviour (H1c), and work (H1d).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Measurement development and data collection

The study was conducted in China, Germany, Poland, Russia, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. The main criterion for selecting these markets was their diversification in terms of culture as well as development. Empirical quantitative research has been carried out in which paper and electronic inquiry forms (CAWI) have been filled out by the respondents. The applied measuring tool was a questionnaire especially prepared for the purpose of the described research.

The research was conducted in 2015 and 2016 among 1,593 respondents, including 295 from China, 117 from Germany, 296 from Poland, 100 from Russia, 130 from Spain, 260 from the United States, and 395 from Turkey. The respondents were selected using one of the nonprobability sampling methods, i.e., purposive sampling. In each market there were designated people responsible for providing the respondents with questionnaires, either in a paper or electronic form. The consequences stemming from the applied sampling method are connected with the interpretation of the obtained results which, in the discussed case, should not be fully generalized to the entire population of the researched countries nor to the Facebook users as a whole.

## 2.2. Respondents' profile

The surveyed respondents agreed to participate in the research and were willing to provide information on their use of Facebook. The study was attended by people of all ages; three age groups were distinguished: 15–20, 21–30, and 31 or more. The respondents within the 21–30 age group predominated in China, Germany, Poland, and Turkey, as well as in Spain, although less significantly. In the United States most participants belonged to the age group of 15–20. In Russia, in the age groups of 15–20 and 21–30 a similar distribution of respondents was found. The smallest number of respondents was aged 31 or more.

Taking into account the diversity of the study group in terms of gender, it should be emphasized that no significant dominance is easily observable. In many countries (e.g. Spain, Germany, the United States, and Turkey) there were almost equal proportions of both genders. The highest predominance of women was observed in three groups (China, Russia, and Poland) whose structure in terms of gender was still very similar.

# 3. Results

In order to identify the frequency of using Facebook among the respondents, five possible answers have been distinguished to accommodate the ones who use it on everyday basis, at least once a week, at least once a month, who have Facebook account but do not use it, and who do not use Facebook at all, and the structure of the answers given has been analysed. An attempt to identify the interdependence between the frequency of using Facebook and the areas of its use has been made with the use of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, applied in order to examine the strength of correlation between quantitative characteristics in the case of a small number of observations. The calculations have been made separately for every studied group because of their distinctness and with the intention to identify the differences between them.

Figure 2 shows the frequency of using Facebook in the studied groups. In the majority of the researched countries it's used very often (in five out of seven studied groups over 70% of respondents use it at least once a day – around 90% in the Polish, German, Spanish, and American groups, and 70.9% in the Turkish group). Facebook is much less popular in Russia and China, where people tend to use the local media (VKontakte in Russia and Qzone in China), sometimes called the equivalents of Facebook because of the similarities in their use and functions.

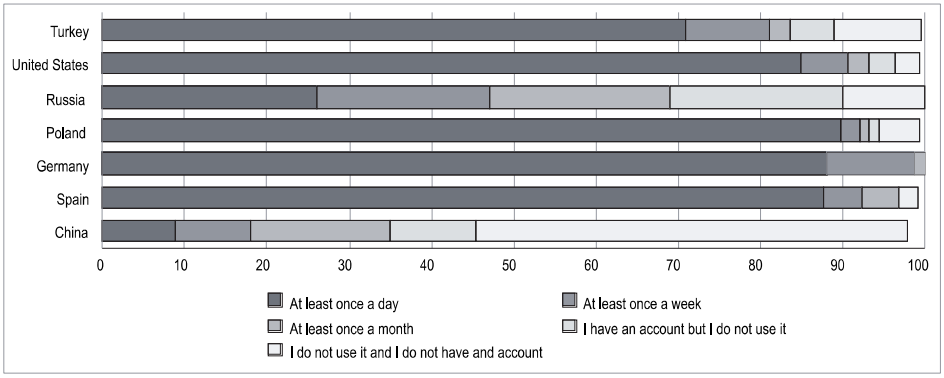



Figure 2. The frequency of using Facebook among the respondents, %
Source: Own research.

In order to identify the frequency of the respondents' behaviour in the above-mentioned areas they were asked to choose one of six answers – very often, often, from time to time, rarely, very rarely, never – for particular questions (Tables 1–4). Spearman's rank correlation indicators that make it possible to determine the existence or lack of correlation between the studied variables are presented below.

It needs to be noted that there exist many correlations between the frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of performing particular activities (Table 1). It is worth noticing that in the case of C11 and C12 a directly proportional positive correlation was obtained in all the studied groups – in the case of C11 in the Russian and American groups it is a medium-strength relation, while in other groups a weak one. In many groups positive correlations regarding C1, C7, C8, C9, and C13 were also observed. The strongest correlation was found in the case of communicating with friends via Facebook (C1) – the more often the respondents use Facebook, the more often they communicate with friends. Positive correlations were most seldom observed in the cases of C3, C4, and C14.

The results of the analysis of the answers provided by the respondents show significant differences between the groups. In Turkey, in almost all distinguished communication activities (except for C3) a positive correlation was obtained. Similar results were achieved in Germany, the United States, and Poland. The fewest positive correlations were observed in Russia, Spain, and China, which could result from a small number of people using Facebook (China, Russia) and a smaller sample size (Spain, Russia).

Table 1. Spearman's rank correlation indicators between the general frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of performing particular communication activities

| Mark | Communication activities | Poland | Spain | China | Turkey | Russia | Germany | US |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | R | R | R | R | R | R | R |
| C1 | I maintain contacts with friends | 0.368* | 0.418* | 0.162* | 0.179* | -0.007 | 0.444* | 0.401* |
| C2 | I maintain contacts with family | 0.120* | 0.220* | 0.047 | 0.185* | 0.136 | 0.238* | 0.379* |
| C3 | I meet new people with similar interests | -0.019 | 0.069 | 0.143* | 0.084 | 0.209* | 0.259* | 0.013 |
| C4 | I exchange opinions on different topics | 0.161* | 0.021 | 0.073 | 0.148* | 0.039 | 0.214* | 0.029 |
| C5 | I comment on entries made by others | 0.239* | 0.084 | 0.148* | 0.254* | 0.159 | 0.390* | 0.234* |
| C6 | I look through photographs and watch films uploaded by others | 0.278* | 0.238* | 0.065 | 0.205* | 0.077 | .0.096 | 0.224* |
| C7 | I upload my own photographs and films | 0.263* | 0.228* | 0.199* | 0.238* | 0.161 | 0.369* | 0.304* |
| C8 | I visit websites recommended by others | 0.193* | 0.091 | 0.194* | 0.203* | 0.240* | 0.298* | 0.171* |
| C9 | I recommend interesting websites to others | 0.204* | 0.034 | 0.162* | 0.180* | 0.211* | 0.279* | 0.130* |
| C10 | I invite friends to various kinds of events | 0.103 | 0.072 | 0.100 | 0.189* | 0.306* | 0.335* | 0.259* |
| C11 | I am being invited by friends to various events | 0.218* | 0.235* | 0.134* | 0.243* | 0.310* | 0.295* | 0.332* |
| C12 | I share information I am interested in | 0.185* | 0.218* | 0.164* | 0.203* | 0.276* | 0.329* | 0.190* |
| C13 | I comment on the information shared by other users | 0.197* | 0.244* | 0.146* | 0.234* | 0.176 | 0.307* | 0.174* |
| C14 | I 'like' the information shared by other users | 0.110 | 0.138 | 0.014 | 0.210* | 0.079 | 0.197* | 0.146* |
| C15 | I belong to thematic groups | 0.239* | 0.082 | 0.146* | 0.192* | 0.187 | 0.031 | 0.169* |
| C16 | I look for current information about different events | 0.161* | 0.222* | 0.218* | 0.095 | 0.046 | 0.267* | 0.186* |

* Correlation is significant at the $p = 0{,}05$ level

Source: Own research.

In the area of education, fewer correlations between the frequency of using Facebook and particular activities were observed (Table 2). The greatest number of correlations among the studied groups were obtained in the case of ED5, i.e., the attitude towards making international acquaintances in order to practice a foreign

language (China, Turkey, Russia, Germany). In the Russian group it was a medium-strength correlation, and in other groups weak, but still statistically significant. Facebook also turned out to be an important intermediary in sending and receiving study materials between students (ED2). In the Polish, German, and American groups positive correlations were noted.

Table 2. Spearman's rank correlation indicators between the general frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of its use for educational purposes

| Mark | Education | Poland | Spain | China | Turkey | Russia | Germany | US |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | R | R | R | R | R | R | R |
| ED1 | I look for information and materials relevant for my education | 0.095 | 0.141 | 0.119* | 0.061 | -0.064 | -0.138 | 0.130* |
| ED2 | I send or receive educational materials to and from my fellow students | 0.263 | 0.155 | 0.052 | 0.101 | -0.078 | 0.213* | 0.170* |
| ED3 | I send or receive educational materials to and from my teachers | -0.010 | 0.125 | 0.019 | 0.115* | 0.028 | 0.047 | 0.112 |
| ED4 | I communicate with my teachers about changes in lecture schedules | -0.057 | 0.173 | -0.035 | 0.044 | 0.051 | 0.070 | 0.134* |
| ED5 | I make new international acquaintances to practice the language I am learning | 0.035 | -0.031 | 0.217* | 0.104* | 0.478* | 0.196* | 0.017 |

* Correlation is significant at the $p = 0{,}05$ level

Source: Own research.

After analysing the above results it needs to be noted that in the Spanish group no statistically significant correlations between the general use of Facebook and its use for educational purposes were observed. A single correlation was found in the Polish and Russian groups, two were observed in the Turkish, Chinese, and German groups, and the biggest number of correlations (three – in the cases of ED1, ED2, and ED4) were obtained in the American group, which could have its justification in the age of the American respondents (the younger they are, the more often they use Facebook for educational purposes).

In the area of consumer behaviour, the greatest correlations were obtained in the Russian group. The strength of the majority of statistically significant relations in this group was moderate. On the other hand, in the Spanish and American groups no statistically important correlation between the presented variables was observed, which might have stemmed from the age of the respondents, as the participants in both groups were 15–20 years old.

Table 3. Spearman's rank correlation indicators between the general frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of its use for consumer purposes

| Mark | Consumer behaviour | Poland | Spain | China | Turkey | Russia | Germany | US |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | R | R | R | R | R | R | R |
| CB1 | I look for information about different products | 0.127* | 0.116 | 0.079 | 0.025 | -0.044 | 0.140 | 0.088 |
| CB2 | I ask friends for advice on purchasing products | 0.165* | 0.040 | 0.121* | 0.137* | -0.119 | 0.188* | 0.002 |
| CB3 | I recommend products to other users | 0.117* | -0.058 | 0.069 | 0.031 | 0.112 | 0.167 | -0.007 |
| CB4 | I share information about products that turned out to be of very low quality | 0.080 | -0.045 | 0.023 | 0.059 | 0.379* | 0.118 | -0.031 |
| CB5 | I sell or buy products | -0.031 | 0.032 | 0.108 | 0.061 | 0.316* | 0.106 | 0.062 |
| CB6 | I watch advertisements | 0.056 | 0.060 | 0.192* | 0.071 | 0.287* | 0.173 | 0.107 |
| CB7 | I advertise products and services | -0.008 | -0.104 | 0.086 | 0.075 | 0.355* | 0.044 | 0.089 |
| CB8 | I obtain discounts for the shops I like | 0.119* | 0.054 | 0.072 | 0.040 | 0.322* | 0.374* | 0.095 |
| CB9 | I take part in the contests organized by the brands I like | 0.036 | 0.026 | 0.148* | 0.129* | 0.296* | 0.362* | 0.035 |

* Correlation is significant at the $p = 0{,}05$ level

Source: Own research.

As evidenced by the results above, using Facebook influences most often and to the greatest extent seeking advice from friends on buying products (CB2) and participating in competitions organized by the brands liked by the respondents (CB9). Relatively numerous and strong, statistically significant correlations were also obtained in the case of C8 in Russia and Germany.

Referring to the respondents' usage of Facebook for work, it is worth noticing that in two groups – Polish and Spanish – no statistically significant correlation was observed. On the other hand, in the Russian and German groups the frequency of using Facebook influences the frequency of engaging in three out of four activities related to work (W1, W2, and W4). Moreover, in the case of W1 and W2 the strength of the correlations was moderate, and only in the case of W4 it was weak. It turns out that in these countries Facebook is a good source of business contacts (W1) and job offers (W2), and a means of presenting the professional achievements of the users (W4).

Table 4. Spearman's rank correlation indicators between the general frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of its use for work

| Mark | Work | Poland | Spain | China | Turkey | Russia | Germany | US |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | R | R | R | R | R | R | R |
| W1 | I look for business contacts | -0.001 | 0.017 | 0.146* | 0.052 | 0.401* | 0.317* | 0.131* |
| W2 | I look for new job offers | 0.031 | 0.042 | 0.110 | 0.047 | 0.301* | 0.261* | 0.098 |
| W3 | I look for information and materials for my work | 0.053 | 0.113 | 0.007 | 0.057 | 0.032 | 0.119 | 0.066 |
| W4 | I share information about my professional achievements | 0.048 | 0.081 | 0.092 | 0.122* | 0.282* | 0.292* | 0.146* |

* Correlation is significant at the $p = 0{,}05$ level

Source: Own research.

In the majority of the researched countries, the frequency of using Facebook influences the frequency of searching for business contacts (W1) – in the Russian and German groups the obtained correlation is moderate – and sharing information about professional achievements (W4). In the case of W3, no statistically significant correlations were obtained in any of the groups.

## Conclusions

In spite of the fact that in most of the researched countries (except for China and Russia) Facebook is the most often used website, the results cannot be generalized. The observed Spearman rank correlation indicators are very varied between both the studied groups and the distinguished areas of Facebook usage. The results show the specificity of particular groups in terms of using Facebook.

The earlier formulated thesis, i.e., that the general frequency of using Facebook influences the frequency of its use in particular areas, has been confirmed; nevertheless, it should be noted that the influence is diversified and depends on the cultural group and the area of activity. In order to verify the working hypotheses, and thus the main thesis, a table summing up the obtained results has been drawn up which shows their validity for particular countries (Table 5).

Table 5. The influence of the frequency of using Facebook on the frequency of engaging in particular areas of activity – verification of the working hypotheses

| Activity / Country | Communication (H1a) | Education (H1b) | Consumer behaviour (H1c) | Work (H1d) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Poland | √ | × | × | × |
| Spain | √ | × | × | × |
| China | √ | × | × | × |
| Turkey | √ | × | × | × |
| Russia | × | × | √ | √ |
| Germany | √ | × | × | √ |
| United States | √ | √ | × | √ |

√ – working hypothesis validated, i.e., there exist statistically significant correlations in at least 50% of the distinguished activities in particular areas

× – no validation of working hypothesis

Source: Own research.

The analysis of the summary presented in Table 5 makes it possible to formulate the following conclusions:

- the frequency of using Facebook influences to the greatest extent the frequency of engaging in activities in the area of communication. H1a has been validated by the results obtained in the Polish, Chinese, Turkish, German, American, and Spanish groups, but not in the Russian group;
- statistically significant correlations between using Facebook and maintaining contacts with friends, browsing websites recommended by others, recommending websites, being invited by friends to various events, sharing interesting information, and commenting other users' posts were evidenced by the highest number of the studied groups;
- the frequency of using Facebook influences to the greatest extent the frequency of engaging in activities in the area of education (most of all in establishing international contacts in order to learn a foreign language as well as sending and receiving educational materials between students) in the American group, which is the only one that validates H1b;
- the frequency of using Facebook influences to the greatest extent the frequency of engaging in consumer behaviour in the Russian group, which is the only one that validates H1c;
- consumer activities influenced by the frequency of using Facebook include looking for advice from friends on buying products, acquiring discounts and participating in contests organized by the brands liked by the users;
- H1d was validated by the results obtained in the Russian, German, and American groups. The frequency of using Facebook influences to the greatest extent

the frequency of looking for business contacts and sharing information about the professional achievements of the users;

– the highest number of correlations between the frequency of using Facebook and the frequency of engaging in activities in the distinguished areas was noted in the American group: the working hypotheses were verified in three out of four researched areas (C, ED, W). They were verified in two areas in the German (C and W) and Russian (CB and W) groups. In the Polish, Chinese, Spanish, and Turkish groups only H1a was validated.

The presented results have a significant application value. On the one hand, they can be of use to the specialists managing Facebook, as they provide information on how it is being used in the researched markets and how the frequency of using Facebook influences particular areas of activity of individual users, thus making it possible to improve its functionality and better adjust it to particular markets. On the other hand, the results of this research provide valuable knowledge to the companies that advertise their products and services on Facebook.

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